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ABSTRACT

Exploring the relationship between generic skills (sometimes called employability skills) and career and technical education (CTE) requires asking these three questions: Are such skills taught in CTE? Can they be taught? Do employers value them over technical skills. A literature review of 14 books, reports, and journal articles concludes that employers want their workers to possess general competency skills such as diligence, creative thinking, sociability, and cooperativeness. Reasons cited for the importance of these generic skills include workplace competitiveness, productivity concerns, and business growth. Educators emphasize the importance of contextual teaching and learning in both classroom and work-based situations to students' skill acquisition. Instructors recommend that student workplace experiences be well monitored to insure the greatest opportunity for learning because of variables such as number and quality. (AJ)

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MYTHS AND REALITIES NO. 22

Generic Skills in Career and Technical Education

by Bettina Lankard Brown
2002

Generic skills, sometimes known as employability skills, are considered essential by employers. This publication explores the myths and realities in the relationship between generic skills and career and technical education (CTE). Are they being taught? Can they be taught? Do employers really value them over technical skills?

Career and Technical Educators Employ a Variety of Strategies for Teaching Generic Skills

The Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) identified the general skills that most workplaces require, thus providing a basis for programs that prepare students for employment. Reform programs such as Tech Prep and High Schools that Work strive to incorporate these "generic" skills as they offer students a rigorous academic background, technological literacy skill development, and learning experiences that are situated in the context of real-world environments (Pucel 1999). Integrated academic and CTE programs and contextual learning efforts offer similar opportunities to promote the learning of generic skills by linking them to specific workplace and social practices. Workplace learning experiences are another way of highlighting generic skill development by placing students in job situations where these generic skills are used in combination with occupational or technical skills.

Although the United States has adopted a variety of strategies for the teaching of generic skills, it is not the only country to do so. Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom have initiated similar programs to address generic skill development. In Australia, integrated curriculum that infuses literacy into specific vocational courses has served to illustrate the necessity of contextualized, multiple literacies (Searle et al. 1999). Case Studies to Advance Skills and Employability, a project conducted at the Universities of Northumbria and Newcastle, emphasized the development of employability skills within the academic curriculum (Holmes and Miller 2000). The contextual integration of employability skills into curriculum has become a recent trend in Canada and the United Kingdom (Overtoom 2000).

Although there is evidence that generic skills are being taught in schools, there is great ambiguity about what they are. Many terms have been used to describe them: key skills, core skills, transferable skills, personal transferable skills, and employability skills. The list of skills defined by whatever term is being used varies across countries; however, most lists include communication skills, interpersonal and social skills, organization and planning skills, problem-solving skills, creative thinking, literacy, and technology skills. The Australian key competencies add "cultural understanding" as a generic skill (Werner 1995). Most attempts to define generic skills more closely "have resulted in a plethora of superficially similar but often significantly different lists" (Drummond, Nixon, and Wiltshire 1998, p. 20).

Guile (2002) contends that definitions of generic skills are grounded in the complexity of relationship that they imply, which in turn directs how the skills are being taught. He illustrates this point by describing two ways in which generic skills are viewed. In the first, generic skills are viewed as the specific property of the individual and defined as the general skills that are needed to work in routine environments. In the second instance, generic skills are viewed in terms of a relationship between an individual and his/her work context; they refer to the skills used in the context of unique, changing work environments. The teaching of generic skills will reflect these differing points of view and the extent to which teaching will be contextualized.

Generic Skills Cannot Be Learned through Traditional Instruction Methods

Current learning theories support the notion that learning occurs through an individual's interaction with others in the context of a real-world event. These theories support the teacher's role as one of facilitator, not lecturer or director. Learning occurs as students develop knowledge, construct meanings, and test out their theories in their community and social environments. Learning generic skills is no exception to this process. Students may learn techniques or practices that reflect a specific skill in the classroom, but they must be able to experience their application in the real world. To help students "learn in context," teachers must become master practitioners among student learners, gain personal exposure to the world of work, and adapt their teaching to support authentic learning (Giddens and Stasz 1999).

The importance of contextualizing the teaching of generic skills is evident when one considers how the culture in which the skill is practiced has a bearing on how it is demonstrated and what is viewed as appropriate (Leveson 2000). For example, in the United States, displaying a certain set of physical operations such as eye contact or good posture serves to illustrate good communication skills; however, in other cultures, displaying these behaviors may be considered acts of aggression or rudeness. "Effective communication requires adequate content knowledge of the subject being communicated and some appreciation for the context or culture in which the communicative act occurs" (Hyslop-Margison 2000, p. 62).

Difficulties in teaching generic skills occur, according to Hyslop-Margison, when instruction puts differing categories of concepts under a single identifier, such as "generic skills." To illuminate this point, Hyslop-Margison contends that it would be a mistake to place team spirit in the same category as the baseball skills of pitching, batting, and catching. The latter skills can be learned and improved by practicing a set of physical operations, whereas skills such as teamwork, problem solving, and critical thinking must be learned in context and preferably linked to students' social worlds. "Indeed, in an educational forum advocating critical thinking, teachers share a responsibility to help students contextualize knowledge by discussing the historical, social, and economic conditions from which it emerges" (Hyslop-Margison 2000, p. 64).

Drummond, Nixon, and Wiltshire (1998) offer several broad approaches to developing skills within the curriculum (p. 21):

- Integrate generic skills within the career-technical education curriculum
- Use free-standing modules that are not integrated into the curriculum, relying on the support of student tutors
- Initiate work placements or work-based projects that will help students to develop employment-related skills within the context of real-world situations

Employers Say They Want Workers Who Have Technical Skills; They Can Train for Employability

In a survey of 400 employers concerning their perceptions of workplace basic skills and competencies required for current and potential employees, the employers said that they want entry-level workers to possess employability skills rather than technology competencies. The

most important to these employers (rating over 92.6%) were basic skills, thinking skills, personal quality skills, and interpersonal competencies; technology competencies and systems competencies rated the lowest at 54.5% and 52.8% respectively (Richens and McClain 2000). In another study, employers identified lack of soft skills (e.g., general social skills, calling if one is going to be late or absent, staying on the job despite frustrations, etc.) as the primary barrier to employment (Owen et al. 2000).

Additional support for the importance of "employability" skills was given by a panel of six business and industry officials who were interviewed to learn their perceptions of necessary skills of employees, the importance of employability skills, school-to-work transition, the national skill standards, and the need for a four-year college degree ("Interview with Business and Industry" 1997). All six employers identified "communication skills" as the primary skill that employers want. Specifically, employers want workers who have the ability to read for information, interact with customers, talk with customers, listen to other people, negotiate, write, and work well with others.

John F. Smith, Jr., president and chief executive officer of General Motors, says—

> what young people need more than a four-year college degree are transferable career skills. Education programs should focus on contextual learning, covering math, science, reading, and writing in a way that puts this knowledge in the context of what is needed on the job...and must give students a solid foundation in the basic skills required in all occupations. ("Interview with Business and Industry" 1997, p. 25)

In engineering, for example, communication skills are often considered more important than high-level mathematics, group work skills more important than academic individuality, and a commitment to lifelong learning and continuing professional development more important than a theoretical contribution to research-focused projects and development (Marsh 1998).

Conclusion

There is no doubt that employers want their workers to have the general skills that will enable them to show up for work; be on time; be diligent, thoughtful, and creative in performing their work duties; and, most important, possess the social skills that enable them to work well independently with other workers, in teams, and with the customers they serve. Increased competition in the workplace has only augmented the need for these skills as their absence can lead to loss of productivity, staff, and business. Most educators see the importance of being able to ground their teaching in the context of real-world situations so that students can not only learn how these skills are used in the workplace, but can practice their use among others and learn how to demonstrate them across a variety of settings. Finding ways to do this effectively is where the challenge lies. Students' contextual learning experiences must be well monitored to ensure that they are affording students their greatest opportunities for learning. As Guile (2002) notes, because workplace experiences vary, learning opportunities are not distributed equally across them. Thus, "work experience has often ended up affirming the idea that its main purpose is to assist young people to learn how to reproduce preexisting activities" (pp. 268-269).

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